

Following the Higher Morality

Maurice W. Lusk, III

How does one determine that a given thing is right or wrong? The usual answer is: by rules, standards, principles, or laws! There must be something that serves as a *paradigm* or *exemplar* of that which is what it "ought" to be. The word "paradigm" is taken from a Greek word that means to show by example or model, the word "exemplar" is taken from a Latin word meaning a standard or authorized copy to go by. When copying Biblical manuscripts in the first century, the scribe would follow an authorized text that was considered a true text. This text was called "the exemplar text" of what the original text was believed to be.

This is what is meant by these terms in the discussion of moral and ethical behavior. There must be some rule, standard, principle, code, law, or some source of authority by which moral judgments or decisions may be made. This is all the more complex in a pluralistic society where there are different standards for different groups. In ancient cultures, questions of proper moral behavior were closely associated with religious belief systems.

Within Judaism the moral standards were different than they were in the various Pagan belief systems; so also with Christianity. Sexual relations outside of marriage were clearly wrong to the early Christians. However, certain sexual relations outside of marriage were acceptable to people of other belief systems, in Judaism as well as paganism. Even though the Jewish Scriptures condemned adultery, it was defined in such a way that Jewish males were allowed certain sexual privileges outside marriage, but the wives were not because of the danger of adulterating the blood line of her husband. Among the Hellenistic religions of the Mediterranean

world, many activities believed to be moral were clearly immoral to Christians. How was morality and immorality determined? The answer lies in the moral paradigm or exemplar by which the different cultures determined acceptable and unacceptable behavior. To most cultures of this ancient world the standard was often a collection of moral codes. To the early Christians, however, the moral character of their Lord was their moral model (paradigm or exemplar). Where with the Jews the question was, "What does the *Torah* say?" with the Christians the question would have been, "What would Jesus do?" Here is one of the most unique characteristics of the Christian religion, namely, its concept of morality as contrasted with all other systems of moral behavior in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Ethical Systems Of The Ancient World

The Meaning Of Morality And Ethics

Our English word "ethics" is taken from the Greek word *ethika* meaning: custom, habit, conduct, or more specifically, correct, proper, or desirable conduct or behavior. The Latin word *moralis* (morals) was used in the ancient world for the same idea as *ethika*. Morals and ethics are, essentially, different words for the same idea or concept. Intrinsic in the idea of ethics is the idea of "oughtness;" there are things we ought to do and things which ought not to do. The study of morals or ethics concerns the questions of "ought" and "ought not" in human behavior.

The Ethics of Greek Philosophy

The philosophical discipline called "moral philosophy" (the study of ethics) in Western culture is traceable back to the ancient Greek philosophers of pre-Christian times. To these thinkers, ethics had to do with how men "ought" to behave with reference to themselves and with reference to others.

Socrates argued that men ought to pursue "knowledge" in order to determine what was ethically good or right. "Only through the acquisition of knowledge (i.e., education) could the human race be

improved," Socrates reasoned. He believed that all immorality was the result of ignorance. It was only through knowledge that man could become a morally responsible being; i.e., do that which was morally right with reference to himself and to others.

Plato's teaching concerning moral behavior was very similar to that of his teacher, Socrates. To Plato, it was not knowledge, *per se*, that made man a better moral being; rather, it was truth; i.e., truth as discovered through rational discourse. Man must become a rational thinker to better himself as a moral being.

Aristotle, following on the thinking of Plato, argued that virtue (i.e., moral/ethical discernment) was within the nature of every human being, but moral sensibility could only be developed through "reason." The truly good man was a rational man. Only through discursive reasoning or dialectical thought could a man come to rational conclusions concerning issues of right and wrong behavior.

Epicurus (founder of the Epicureans [cf. Acts 17:18]) argued that the greatest "ought" of man's existence was the pursuit of pleasure. "We call pleasure the *alpha* and *omega* of the blessed life," wrote Epicurus, "we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing." That which was morally or ethically good was that which brought the greatest amount of pleasure.

Zeno (founder of the Stoics [cf., Acts 17:18]) argued that man's greatest "ought" was to do what was natural for him to do. Man could not help but follow his instincts in his behavior. To Zeno, to call any action right or wrong was irrational. Every action is either natural or unnatural. To insist that one ought to do that which was unnatural for him to do was the immoral thing to him. There was no such thing as right or wrong to Zeno; there was only fate, and if it were man's fate to behave in a certain way, it would be wrong to condemn his actions. Man was the product of nature and could not change his determined behavior no more than any other product of nature.

To some of the Greek philosophers it was "reason alone," which

determined correct moral behavior, to others it was "emotion alone," but to all of them it was "man alone" who determined what was morally right or wrong.

The Ethics of Ancient Paganism

By "Paganism" we mean the belief systems of the first century Mediterranean world other than the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. This would include the classical religions of Greece, Egypt, Rome, Asia Minor, and the Oriental religions of the Near East (Babylon/Persia).

What was pagan about this culture was not its atheism; rather, it was its polytheism. Most people believed that supernatural power was at work in their world but they associated the manifestation of this power with a host of deities. These deities were not believed to be "Supreme Beings," as was the case with the God of Judaism and Christianity. The gods and goddesses of ancient paganism were, at best, only "supernatural beings." Their distinction from mortal or human beings was their possession of supernatural powers and their eternal or immortal status. In moral behavior they were no better than mortal beings. They were given to sexual immorality, drunkenness and riotous behavior, as well as a host of sordid emotions. In the various myths which portrayed them, they were often characterized as beings filled with hatred, jealousy, fits of rage, and selfish ambition, which most usually expressed itself in unjust and vindictive treatment of other deities as well as the mortal beings of the human race.

What is usually considered most "pagan" about these religions is that the supernatural power unique to them was very often associated with the forces of evil at work in the world. Their gods and goddesses were just as likely to do that which was evil that which was good. If the gods and goddesses of a given people were given to immoral behavior, how could simple mortal beings be expected to behave any better? In reality, there was more concern with moral behavior among the philosophers than in the religious practices of this culture. Herein lies the problem of ancient paganism;

viz., it failed to provide an adequate paradigm or exemplar of moral behavior for the people of these cultures.

Ethical System Of Judaism

The Ethics of Torah

The moral beliefs of ancient Israel were rooted in Biblical revelation. The moral and ethical system in place in first century Judaism was a system of "code ethics." What was believed to be right behavior (i.e., righteousness) to the Jewish world of the first century was what the scholars of Judaism declared as the teaching of *Ha Torah* (i.e., the Law). There morality was determined by the codes given in the Law of Moses. The moral/ethical system of Judaism was a system of "code ethics."

This system consisted, primarily, of the moral codes of the *Torah* (the law of Moses) and the moral preaching of the prophets, which was found in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Rabbinic Traditions

The moral codes of much of the Judaism of this period consisted of the moral teachings of the Torah as interpreted by the scholastic community. This body of interpretation was first an "oral tradition," which was, in later centuries, written down by Jewish scribes in a collection of writings called *the Mishnah*, then expanded in a large collection of rabbinic interpretations called the *Jerusalem Talmud* and the *Babylonian Talmud*.

Oral Tradition and Code Ethics

This "oral tradition" included not only moral codes but ritual codes and is referred to in the Gospels as "the traditions of the elders." This "code ethics" system constituted a system of legalism second to none. This is what Jesus opposed so tenaciously in his teaching and preaching; so also the Apostle Paul in his ministry to the Gentiles. Jesus was constantly confronted by the Pharisee, the

most conservative moralist of Judaism, in their criticism of his association with those they considered to be morally unfit; i.e., the diseased, the demon possessed, harlots, publicans, the disenfranchised and outcasts of society; those called the *awnazim* (the peasantry) in Hebrew Scripture. Jesus was considered immoral in their eyes because he refused to be bound by their code of ethics. "The Son of Man came eating and drinking," says Jesus to his accusers, "and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.'" Jesus was not interested in their code of ethics; rather, he was here to show them how to live by their moral character, to live as beings created in the image of God. This point is well stated in the following:

The morality of the scribes and Pharisees consists in following rules and regulations that seek to govern actions in every conceivable circumstance of life. When Jesus calls upon those who would enter into the kingdom to exceed this morality of the scribes and Pharisees, it is not that he wishes to overthrow this body of Law, but to transcend it. (John A. Sanford, *The Kingdom Within*, 34-35)

Both Paul's letter to the Galatians and the letter to the Romans are concerned, in great measure, with this issue. Judaism's system of code ethics was, in essence, a doctrine of "salvation by law keeping" or "righteousness by works." Paul's great break from his Pharisaic background was his teaching of "salvation by new creation," rather than by law keeping. In conversion to Christ one became a new creation whose life was governed by a different paradigm that law codes; rather, their moral behavior was determined by what Jesus would do in any given situation. The old man "in Adam," whose behavior was controlled by law, and condemned by law, was put to death, and out of their old life a new man had been raised into new existence "in Christ." This new man's behavior followed a higher morality, a morality rooted in the moral character of Jesus. Again, we quote from the above author:

It would not be necessary to have a Law forbidding murder, adultery, stealing, coveting, and slander if there were not a part of our personality that might do exactly these things. The scribes and

Pharisees seek to avert the danger of this inner "shadow" by following rules that prohibit these things. But the higher morality requires confronting the shadowy one with us who has made the rules necessary in the first place. In this way we achieve a truly differentiated moral attitude toward ourselves and life and are fit for the creative life of the kingdom. (Sanford, *The Kingdom Within*, 35)

The Moral System of Christianity

Jesus Of Nazareth and Moral Character

When we speak of Christian ethics, we are speaking of a moral or ethical system that centers in the moral character of Jesus of Nazareth. It is Jesus as Lord who stands before the Christian as the paradigm of moral behavior. It is not his commands or teachings *per se*, but "him," who is the moral standard by which we live. If Jesus is our Lord, then his words are authoritative for us, just as the life he lived is authoritative for us. But we must make every effort not to reduce him and his lordship over our lives to a cataloging of his teachings. Somehow Jesus as Lord gets lost in the process and "the teaching" becomes "our Lord" rather than the one who gave us the teaching.

The Higher Morality of the Moral Character of Jesus

The collected body of revelation can become more authoritative than that which has been revealed. This is what happened to first century Judaism, resulting in the worship of the Law. The *Torah*, consisting of its statutes, judgments, and commandments, became the god of the Hebrews - their judge and their savior. All the while they gave lip service to God, but when the issues of right or wrong, good or evil, truth or error, righteousness or unrighteousness was considered, the Law was the final authority, not the revelation of God contained within the Law. The old Hebrew Scriptures were intended to be a revelation of who God was; but it became a personified authority figure - a god in and of itself! Their treasured parchment scrolls became literal icons or "Idols."

What Would Jesus Do?

A major mistake in the thinking of first century Judaism was that law was authoritative because it was law. This is wrong. Law is only authoritative because those who created it (its authors) can enforce it. The teachings of Christ are authoritative because he is Lord, not because his words are law.

Law can only control and/or condemn a person, it cannot transform him. Here is the difference between all other religions and Christianity. In the religion of Christianity, Christ is not concerned with controlling the one converted to him; rather, he is concerned with transforming him. Conversion to Christ is a transformation - a character transformation. This character transformation occurs through the believer's conformity to the image of Christ (i.e., his moral image or character), not by conformity to a set of codes or collection of commandments.

The difference so important for us to see is that our Lord is a person, not a book or a collection of writings. These writings that are so important to us are important because they reveal to us the one to who is our redeemer and Lord. His life is a paradigm of what it means to live as a being created in the image of God. It is the revelation of him we must see in these writings in order to see that which has the power to redeem us and transform us. He is what is morally right and the revelation of him and his teachings is what the writings are all about (John 5:39-40). The question of moral or ethical behavior for the follower of Jesus is not one of "What do the Scriptures say?" but rather, "What would Jesus do?"

It is his behavior that answers our questions of moral behavior. One may inform his faith with reference to what the Scriptures have to say on what is and what is not good moral behavior. But the task of knowing where the Scriptures address the issues of lying, stealing, or causing injury to another person is addressed for the believer by asking, "What Jesus would do when faced with the temptation of lying, stealing, or causing injury to another person?" Knowing the teachings of Scripture on the matter is good, but to know how to

correctly interpret those texts, one should ask, "How would Jesus have understood this text?"

Jesus of Nazareth did not experience the incarnation in order to give us new law or a set of moral codes; rather, he came to reveal God to us, to show us the Father (John 1:18; 14:7-9), in order that we, as beings created in the image of God, would know who and what we are supposed to be. Jesus should be a revelation of God to us. Just as the Scriptures are a revelation of God in the form of a book or collection of writings, Jesus of Nazareth was a revelation of God in the form of a man, who was both "one of us" and "God with us." This is why he is the paradigm or exemplar of all moral and ethical behavior for his followers. In that we have seen him, we have seen the Father. When we have seen the Father, we have seen the one in whose image we have been created. Then, and only then, can we know ourselves as we are known by God.

MWLIII

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does anyone determine what is morally right or wrong?
2. What is meant by such terms "ethical" and "moral"?
3. What were the strengths or weaknesses the moral teachings of ancient philosophy?
4. What was wrong with the moral systems of ancient Paganism?
5. What was the ethical system of first century Judaism? Give reason and discussion to your answer.
6. How do Christian ethics differ from the ethics of Judaism? Example: If we are under the Ten Commandments, are we not under the same type of ethical system as the Jews? Are we or are we not under a code of ethics as were the Jews?

7. How do you understand "code ethics" to differ from "character ethics?"

8. Why is it so important to see that our moral system as Christians centers in the moral character of Jesus of Nazareth and not in a collection of commands or moral codes?

9. Why can law not effect a transformation of one's character? What can law do? Answer: control behavior and condemn uncontrolled behavior.

10. What is the major error of first century Judaism in this discussion and why is it so important that we avoid this error?